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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: PATRIARCH CALLS FOR DIALOGUE, BURJANADZE REJECTS
OPPOSITION "ULTIMATUM"

REF: TBILISI 473

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Mark X. Perry for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) Summary: On March 20, Georgian Patriarch Ilia II called on the United National Council of Opposition (UNC) and the New Rightists (NR) to end their hunger strike (reftel) and return to dialogue with the ruling National Movement (UNM). At the same time, Ilia II called on the UNM to "take steps to lessen confrontation and promote the resumption of talks." Following the Patriarch's call, UNC leaders and NR Chairman David Gamkrelidze met with Ilia II at his residence.

The opposition leaders unanimously presented a "compromise proposal" to Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze, following the meeting. The proposal agreed to drop all other opposition demands if the UNM would agree to elect 75 majoritarian seats in Parliament according to "regional proportional lists" rather than by single mandate districts. Burjanadze, visibly tense in a live TV address, rejected the opposition's proposal as an "ultimatum." She said that the opposition should pay due respect to the Patriarch and immediately accede to his request, ending the hunger strike. Burjanadze said the UNM is ready to continue dialogue, but did not address the Patriarch's call for the government itself to take steps and ease tensions. Later, former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili, in a live TV interview from Paris, criticized the opposition and called again for President Saakashvili's peaceful ouster. End Summary.

Patriarch Appeals to End Hunger Strike

12. (U) On March 20, the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II, called on the UNC and NR to end their hunger strike, now in its twelfth day. Ilia II said the strike had "moved to a stage threatening to human life, which is non-Christian." He also said the authorities were "looking for a way out of the current situation, something that can only be done through agreement between all sides." Ilia II appealed to both sides to "remember that, based on state interests, making compromise is an attribute of the strong; it does not mean weakness or stepping back."

13. (U) In the evening of March 20, UNC leaders and NR Chairman David Gamkrelidze met with Ilia II at his residence to explain their reasons for launching the hunger strike. The opposition leaders unanimously signed and presented a "compromise proposal" to Parliamentary Speaker Nino Burjanadze, following the meeting. The proposal agreed to drop all other opposition demands if the UNM would agree to elect 75 majoritarian seats in Parliament according to "regional proportional lists" rather than by single mandate districts. Their proposed system would involve drawing new districts that would each contain a more equal number of

voters than the current, UNM-supported system. Votes in each district would be tabulated proportionately by party lists. UNC leader Koba Davitashvili said "we will not stop the hunger strike if this single demand put forth by us is not met, and the Patriarch will understand this decision of ours."

Burjanadze Refuses "Ultimatum"

14. (SBU) Later in the evening on live TV, a tense Burjanadze refused the proposal as an "ultimatum, and totally unacceptable." Burjanadze thanked the Patriarch "for expressing his care and calling upon our opponents to end their hunger strike." She then criticized the opposition for not "unconditionally ending the hunger strike" following the Patriarch's appeal. Continuing, she said the proposal constituted a "political demand put forth toward the Patriarch himself." Burjanadze deemed it "totally unacceptable to set political demands as a precondition to ending the hunger strike." Burjanadze did not address the Patriarch's call for the government to ease tensions. She merely restated that the government is "ready for political dialogue and many issues need to be negotiated to hold free and democratic elections."

Okruashvili Comments on Crisis

15. (U) Later still on March 20, former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili said Georgia is in "a serious political crisis" in a live interview on Rustavi-2 TV. Awaiting an extradition hearing in Paris on April 16, Okruashvili said the crisis was caused by "inconsistent" actions by the opposition and the authorities' "tough stance." He described

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the opposition's demands regarding the Central Election Commission Chairman, Burjanadze's resignation, and more-or-less seats in Parliament as meaningless. Rather, Okruashvili said the opposition should focus on maintaining freedom of speech and demanding the restoration of Imedi TV. He accused President Saakashvili's government of trying to appropriate Imedi TV from deceased oligarch Badri Patarkatsishvili's family (septel). Okruashvili once again repeated his call for the "peaceful ouster" of President Saakashvili.

Comment

16. (C) Following the Patriarch's appeal to both sides, and their meeting with him, the opposition's proposal could have provided a face-saving way out of the current standoff for both sides. The proposal is similar to one put forth by the Republican party on March 18. It likely would give the opposition a better chance in the 75 majoritarian seats than the existing single mandate districts. It also would avoid constitutional amendments and allow representative seats for the separatist regions. Burjanadze's comments were more terse than usual, and she appears to be under significant pressure from the UNM. With no movement on either side, the situation remains a lose-lose proposition for both, for which the increasingly-detached Georgian electorate will pay the price. Perhaps the return of President Saakashvili tonight from his successful visit to Washington will provide an opportunity to break the stalemate.

PERRY